

REPORTS AND PAMPHLETS

Helping Mentally Handicapped People in Hospital.

Department of Health and Social Security, 1978.

The most engaging quality of this Report is its frankness. The prejudices of the National Development Group are stated fairly and squarely on page one of the Introduction. According to the Group—'a hospital is a prison without walls, a place that no longer meets their needs but where they must remain because there is nowhere else for them to live and nothing for them to do outside the hospital' . . . 'where standards of care are often inferior to those for children without handicap in residential care' . . . and 'we fully support the policies expressed in the 1971 White Paper that there must be a radical shift of emphasis from hospital to community.'

When itemizing the aims and functions of a mental handicap hospital, the Report ignores the medical and psychiatric services, and when talking of the availability of medical services it refers, not to the psychiatric hospital staff, but to the availability of orthopaedic and ENT services, etc., from outside. Added to this, according to the Development Group, there is not a single 'patient' in the National Health Service hospitals for the mentally handicapped but merely 'residents'. The result is a grotesque caricature of the National Health Service for the handicapped. One cannot help but gain the impression that, in the Group's view, medicine has no part to play in the care of the mentally handicapped within the National Health Service. If this is a correct reflection of the view of the Department of Health and Social Security then it is high time that this was stated unequivocally by the Government, hospitals run down rapidly and the medical, nursing and paramedical personnel transferred to other fields of medicine. If, on the other hand, the Department of Health and Social Security thinks that hospitals have still got an important role to play in the provision of total services, then they should acknowledge it and allow these services to develop without the handicap of denigration and denial of adequate facilities. Under the present unsatisfactory regime the medical and nursing personnel in the National Health Service dealing with the handicapped are bewildered and their morale has plummeted. The breakdown in quality of care which occurs all too frequently in mental handicap hospitals can be laid at the door of poor morale brought about by Government policies.

It is difficult to imagine what the function of the

present Report is. If it is a report on the present practices to be found in the National Health Service then it seems somewhat tautological. If it is an attempt at being a text-book on the clinical management of the mentally handicapped in hospital then it is patchy and incomplete. For example, half a page allocated to behaviour modification is hardly an adequate introduction to that form of treatment. The only discussion of psychiatric problems appears to be a reference to disturbed behaviour. One would question whether all disturbed behaviour is just due to lack of stimulation and boredom, as the report suggests, and whether it can be dealt with without having recourse to medication or psychotherapy.

The striking thing about the recommendations in the Report is that they seem to be based on preconceptions held by the Group who do not think it necessary to provide any argument, to say nothing of factual support, for their beliefs. They also seem to have ignored any positive argument in favour of hospital care; they quote in their bibliography from the Campaign for the Mentally Handicapped, but omit to give any references to the contribution of psychiatrists in hospital services. It is also surprising that when writing of mental handicap there is no mention anywhere of the importance of further research.

To the reviewer, the most worrying aspect of the Report is the unspoken assumption that clinicians should be told how to do their job by a committee largely composed of laymen. Working toward advances in research and development used to be considered to be the function of the consultants in the specialty. Projects for improving the services and development of research or special treatment facilities emanated from the hospital and were submitted to the authorities for implementation. Now apparently clinicians are not to show any initiative but are to sit and wait for administrative pronouncements. Increasingly, of late, there have been attempts to erode the independence of consultants both through bureaucratic action and through the creation of so-called multidisciplinary teams which usurp consultant functions and, needless to say, find great favour in the eyes of the Development Group.

The Report does contain valuable comments and suggestions, and does reflect some of the better aspects of modern management and hospital practice. To be quite fair, the National Development Group does care for the handicapped and is full of good intentions, but then the way to Hell is paved with them.

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